

STORY BY TECH. SGT. BENNIE DAVIS III • PHOTO BY JEFF ANASTASIO FOR KENS 5 NEWS

HONORED TO REMEMBER

I first visited our nation's capital when I was 13 years old, for a family vacation during the summer of '89. I instantly fell in love with the city.

For me, the most memorable part of our vacation was seeing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. My uncle, William Forrest Davis, has his name on the wall. He was killed in action in 1969, never making it to his 21st birthday.

Like it was yesterday, I remember walking along the memorial, my eyes scanning the names on the wall as the panels grew larger with each step. It was a quiet walk with my family. No one spoke a word around us. We all seemed to feel we were on sacred ground.

I watched in awe as others laid war medals, flags and personal notes along the way. Some knelt in prayer, while others leaned against the wall with their heads down and arms outstretched, touching the names of their long lost comrades, friends and relatives as if they were on the other side of the black stone holding them up.

As we approached panel 17W, line 49, I looked up to see my uncle's name. For me it was like meeting him for the first time.

Our family lost all but six photos of him when his personal items and pictures disappeared in the mail. The only photo we had at home was his Army basic training graduation photo. I was proud of him for serving our country, yet saddened by the fact we never met. My father, a Marine, just stared at his brother's name until his emotions overcame him.

We used pencils to rub my uncle's name from the wall onto a small white sheet of paper. I felt honored knowing that my uncle was remembered and that I could take his name home from the memorial. That day, I realized the importance of the memorials honoring men and women who have sacrificed their lives for our freedoms.

Recently, 21 years after that family trip, I was on another trip to the capital, among two busloads of 30 WWII veterans.

That was the first trip to Washington, D.C., for most of those veterans. For all of them, it marked the first time they saw the memorial honoring them as America's "Greatest Generation."

Alamo Honor Flight, a nonprofit organization, provided the veterans this "tour of honor" from San Antonio to pay tribute to those who gave so much. Airfare, lodging,

meals and the bus tour were all paid for through donations.

When we arrived at our first destination of the day, the National World War II Memorial, our veterans joyfully, yet slowly, made their way to the memorial's Pacific Arch as bystanders cheered and thanked them for their service.

Once we passed into the memorial everyone became silent.

I could see it in their eyes and in their faces; the memories of a distant war and friends and family long gone were flooding their minds as they took in the sights of the memorial.

In an instant, the trip intended to pay tribute to them became more about them paying tribute to those they lost.

I watched as a hardened former Marine, a bulldog of a man, was wheeled in his chair and parked facing the Field of Stars, a part of the memorial that represents more than 400,000 service members lost in WWII.

The man was overwhelmed. The brim of his WWII veteran hat covered his eyes, yet it didn't cover the tears that rolled down his cheeks. For Curtis Summers, this trip meant visiting an old friend and letting go of the regrets he's felt for making it out of the war alive, when most of his unit did not.

For all the veterans it was a time of reflection, and as I made my way through the crowd taking pictures, I was filled with a sense of pride for these men and women and humbled by the moments I was witnessing.

As our time to leave the memorial grew near, the veterans gathered for a group photo. Smiles and laughter now replaced the somber emotions as they shared

stories and joked with each other while I snapped a few shots.

After the pictures, we headed back to the buses to continue our exciting day of visiting each individual service's memorial as well as the Korean War Veterans Memorial, Lincoln Memorial, Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Iwo Jima Memorial before ending the day with a wreath laying and a changing of the guard ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery.

Along the way, I talked with a Marine who was present at the flag raising at Iwo Jima in February 1945, and stood next to Joe Rosenthal as he clicked the shutter on the most iconic military image to date.

I shared coffee and stories with a naval cook who spent the evening of Dec. 6, 1941, at a Honolulu club with his shipmates, before staggering back to the USS Oklahoma in the early morning to only be awakened by the alarms of attack hours later at Pearl Harbor.

These men and women have inspiring stories, rich with our nation's history. According to Veterans Affairs officials, an estimated 1,100 WWII veterans pass away each day. So much history is lost with them. It was an honor for me to share this day alongside these distinguished veterans.

At the end of the day, in what has become a tradition since my first visit to the National Mall, I stopped by to visit William. I now own nearly 20 little white sheets of paper with his name rubbed into each, one for every visit. I've never visited his grave; in fact I don't know where it is. For me, William is in our nation's capital, honored and memorialized as a hero.



Tech. Sgt. Bennie J. Davis III
at the U.S. Air Force Memorial, taking photos during an honor flight visit in Washington, D.C. Sergeant Davis is a photojournalist assigned to Airman magazine with the Defense Media Activity in San Antonio.

